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Groundbreaking wetland initiative seeks to encompass 43,000 acres

Spans four counties, 94 river miles of Sugar Creek, Wabash

Sue Loughlin

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TERRE HAUTE — Indiana is making plans to acquire up to 43,000 acres along the Wabash River and Sugar Creek floodplain in west-central Indiana, part of an unprecedented land conservation/

wetlands project that will benefit wildlife, public recreation and the environment.

Gov. Mitch Daniels announced the initiative Thursday at The Landing. He spoke outdoors, with the Wabash River flowing in the background.

The area involved, which follows 94 river miles along the Wabash River, stretches across four counties from Shades State Park to Fairbanks Landing Fish & Wildlife Area in Sullivan County.

The planned Wabash River wetlands area is expected to be larger than the combined size of the Morgan-Monroe State Forest and Brown County State Park.

“It will be one continuous wildlife habitat, one of the largest in the eastern United States,” Daniels said. His comments drew applause from the large crowd.

The project, which includes two separate habitat areas, is the largest ever undertaken by the Department of Natural Resources. Daniels will announce the second part of the project, located in southeastern Indiana, today.

Daniels said the goal is to make Indiana a national leader in wetlands and wildlife protection.

“Coupled with Goose Pond [in Greene County], our experts believe that the new, 94-mile continuous Wabash River habitat will become one of the major Eastern U.S. waterfowl destinations and a tourist destination along with it,” he said.

The state will use \$21.5 million from the Lifetime License Trust Fund, a state trust fund dedicated to conservation purposes, and \$10 million from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to begin the acquisitions. That investment will leverage millions of dollars in additional private and federal funding for both the protection and restoration of the corridor.

The Lifetime License Trust Fund contains revenue from the sale of lifetime fishing, hunting and trapping licenses. No state tax dollars are involved.

Additional support will come from The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service and Ducks Unlimited, a national conservation group based in Memphis, Tenn.

Mary McConnell, Indiana state director for the Nature Conservancy, described the project as "the most amazing and perhaps the most significant investment in conservation in a generation in Indiana. It's exactly the kind of project that we should be working on as a state," she said.

The Wabash corridor has long been a priority for the nature conservancy, she said. The Wabash is "Indiana's river," she said. It is 475 miles long and one of the most biologically diverse rivers in the country, she said.

The DNR will work to acquire land in the area from willing sellers, building upon the recent excitement regarding the Wabashiki Fish & Wildlife Area, a proposed 7,000-acre project along the Wabash River in West Terre Haute.

McConnell credited local partners involved with the Wabashiki project as being a catalyst for the larger project announced Thursday. "It's the local partners here that have had a vision from the very beginning," she said, naming John Mutchner, Keith Ruble and Max Miller. She also referred to Wabash River Development and Beautification Inc., Riverscape and the Vigo County Parks and Recreation Department.

After the governor's announcement, Miller said the wetlands project will have a major impact not only on wildlife and waterfowl, but on the local economy as well. "We [Terre Haute] are the central city of this project," he said.

Miller described it as a "once-in-a-lifetime chance" to use a dedicated state trust fund, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service funds and other private funding to create the Wabash River wetlands corridor. "I think it's a legacy that he [Daniels] has put together," Miller said.

Miller said he may not be around when the project is completed, but "it's for my grandkids. It's for the future."

Robert D. Hoffman, director of Ducks Unlimited for the Great Lakes/Atlantic Regional office, said during the news conference, "This is unprecedented for a state to be developing a corridor ... with this many acres." He described it as an "amazing" initiative

"We should all be very, very proud of what's going on here," Hoffman said.

Ducks, geese and other waterfowl that migrate from the Arctic and Canada down through the United States to Mexico will find more and better habitat in Indiana, he said. It will change local migration patterns of waterfowl in this portion of the Mississippi Flyway.

"This is fantastic news" for waterfowl enthusiasts in Indiana, Hoffman said.

While the project could take several years, Daniels said it's the state's goal "to make this real as fast as it can practically be done."

He thanked private and public groups who came together "to do something I hope generations of Hoosiers will look back and be grateful for and enjoy."

In an interview, Daniels said he believes the Wabash River wetlands project will eventually become known nationally as a wildlife habitat, drawing tourists and outdoor recreation enthusiasts. He also hopes it means a boost to the Terre Haute economy.

The project also will bring significant flood control advantages, the governor said, one reason the federal government is participating.

It will involve purchase of property that can be adversely impacted by flooding, including farmland.

As the project develops, the goal will be to provide plenty of public access for fishing and other outdoor recreational activities, said Nick Heinzelman, DNR director of land acquisition. The state's goal is "to try to connect the bigger parcels we already own into a continual habitat corridor down the river."

The property will be acquired from "willing sellers, something that will take time," Heinzelman said. Some people will be ready to sell their floodplain property immediately, while others may want to wait a few years. Some people may not sell at all.

The overall Wabash project eventually will be six times larger than the 8,000-acre Goose Pond Fish & Wildlife Area, which was purchased in 2006.

Other key objectives of the initiative are to protect habitat for threatened and endangered species; preserve significant rest areas for migratory birds, especially waterfowl, and to create a regionally significant conservation destination.

Terre Haute Mayor Duke Bennett said the Wabash River wetlands project represents "a once-in-a-lifetime project. You don't have many things that are this large in scale. Terre Haute sits right in the heart of it. We all stand to benefit from this state project."